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ABSTRACT

To examine the relationship between school and community characteristics and the transfer of black students from two- to four-year colleges, a study was conducted of black transfer rates and institutional characteristics at 53 colleges in North Carolina. Transfer data were obtained from the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer and linked to demographic information on schools and counties in National Center for Educational Statistics files for 1991. Analyses of the data revealed the following: (1) with respect to institutional characteristics, larger colleges showed higher black transfer rates than smaller colleges, although the percentage of black students in the college population as a whole was negatively related to black transfer rates; (2) the existence of day-care facilities was positively correlated to transfer rates; (3) while a vocational emphasis at an institution had no effect on black transfer rates, higher ratios of black to white students in such programs resulted in lower transfer rates, indicating that disproportionately minority programs are often devalued and lead to further inequalities; (4) with respect to community characteristics, mean income was positively related to transfer rates; (5) while the percent of black residents in a community was also positively related to transfer, colleges in predominantly black communities had greater percentages of black students and disproportionately more blacks in vocational programs, both of which depressed the transfer rate and offset net positive effects. Contains 22 references. (KP)

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TWO-YEAR COLLEGE TRANSFER RATES OF BLACK-AMERICAN STUDENTS

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TWO-YEAR COLLEGE TRANSFER RATES OF BLACK-AMERICAN STUDENTS

Abstract

Given the high enrollments of black students in two-year schools and some concerns about the possibility of declining returns to terminal associate degrees (see Kane and Rouse 1993), it is important to understand the conditions of transfer to four-year schools. In this paper, we primarily address questions about transfer rates of black-American students from two-year to four-year programs, but briefly summarize conclusions about other outcomes for black and white students in these same schools. Questions about school conditions that influence transfer rates are difficult to answer because sources of data on individuals do not include identifying information on the schools they attend. However, information on about one-half of one state's two-year schools allows us to address the following questions: What are the school characteristics that promote the transfer rate of blacks? How are the characteristics of communities, in which many or most of the enrolled students live, related to the black transfer rate? Findings highlight the complex effects of racial composition of communities, of schools, and of vocational tracks on student outcomes. They challenge a popular view that small schools are the best environments for minority students. We also detect positive effects of day-care facilities on transfer rates. Comparisons with other student outcomes (degrees and white transfer rates) are summarized.

TWO-YEAR COLLEGE TRANSFER RATES OF BLACK-AMERICAN STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

Black enrollments in all postsecondary programs accelerated between 1975 and 1985, although in recent years there have been declines which can be traced to cutbacks in scholarships, declining black employment, and thwarted affirmative action programs (Allen, Epps, and Haniff 1991; McGrath and Speer 1991). In attempting to understand what promotes favorable educational outcomes for black-Americans we focus on the two-year school. Because black enrollments increased faster in two-year programs than in other postsecondary schools and because these schools provide the first-time college experience for at least half of all graduating high seniors, two-year schools provide a large pool of candidates - especially black candiates - for four-year schools. Moreover, recent research suggests that the credentialling effect of the associate degree is relatively small compared with the economic returns on earned college credits (Kane and Rouse 1993), suggesting the importance of additional schooling beyond the AA degree. This is corroborated by other research that indicates that adults with less education than a college degree have been especially handicapped during the past years of high unemployment and stagnant wages (Smith 1992). In short, the incentive structure suggests an increasing rate of transfer in the future.

Increasingly, social and educational policy centers attention on the context of outcomes. Context is important

because there is growing evidence that black-white differences in educational outcomes cannot be traced to ability as measured by standardized tests (for a general discussion, see Jencks 1992). Context includes institutional arrangements as well as the socio-demographic characteristics of the community. We assume that it makes a difference for members of a conspicuously "different group," notably blacks but also ethnic minorities and women, whether there are few or many of them. Moreover, "tracks" (that is, programs or institutions that are composed of disproportionately many, say, blacks or women) are often devalued regardless of their historical origins and whether self-selection or institutional policy is responsible. More specifically, the concentration of blacks in particular educational programs reinforces stereotyping and can establish a trajectory that leads to further inequalities between whites and blacks with respect to occupational attainments and earnings (Willie and Cunnigen 1981).

This is clearly a complex matter. On the one hand, large representation is considered to empower the members of a group and to enhance self esteem and confidence, and also to buffer the forces of the larger environment. Recent study results indicate that black Americans are increasingly successful in achieving favorable academic and occupational outcomes when they attend predominantly black colleges (Black Issues in Higher Education 1992; American Council on Education 1987). Presumably this is because such schools provide a nurturant environment (Davis 1991; for a recent summary of the literature, see Blau 1993). On the other hand, there are few studies that examine the consequences

for blacks of attending predominantly white schools with varying racial composition. Earlier research on state systems with tiered and coordinated postsecondary schools demonstrates that minorities and students from poorer family backgrounds are concentrated in two-year schools (see Pinkney 1984). Thus, the question is, what facilitates transfer and, thus, helps to improve black educational attainments?

Another form of racial disparity occurs within schools. The prevailing view is that academic integration is a major factor contributing to the success of black students in predominantly white schools. However, this view is based on studies that measure the perceptions of students (for example, Dougherty 1991) and not distributions of black and white students in different programs. Our research specifies such integration by the percent of all students in paraprofessional programs and the extent to which blacks are over-represented in them. While there is no inherent reason that vocational programs are inferior ones, there is widespread perceptions among students and faculty that this is the case. Regardless of perceptions, unless vocational programs are racially integrated they become devalued.

While our analysis pertains to transfer rates of minority students in predominantly white, public two-year schools within one state, some comparisons are provided on other outcome indicators, namely, rates of white transfer and of race-specific degrees. The narrow scope of this research is due to the fact that transfer rates are difficult to obtain for a representative sample of schools for many states. We do, however, have

information on half of the public two-year schools from this particular state. Owing to the similarity of admissions standards and curriculum policies within the state, we are not dealing with the complexities of a very heterogeneous sample of institutions. This allows us to focus on school and community differences, albeit with a modest framework and small number of cases.

Moreover, our focus is transfer rates, not the likelihood of individuals transferring. Almost all that is known at the individual-level is based on different waves of the National Longitudinal Sample, or NLS (Velez 1985; Breneman and Nelson 1981; Velez and Javalgi 1987; Lee and Frank 1991). The results of these individual-level studies highlights the significance of socioeconomic status, aspirations, parental attitudes about educations, and high school performance. Also noted in the research using NLS data is the importance of institutional attachment, such as campus residence and being in a work-study program (Dougherty 1987), and, proximity of the student to a two-year school (Rouse 1993). However, institutional characteristics themselves are not available to researchers except as they are described by respondents. This study fills some of the gaps in our understanding of institutional influences on minority student outcomes.

Methods and Data

The definition of the transfer rate is the number of a cohort who take one or more classes within a university within four years of graduating, divided by the number in the original cohort who completed at least 12 college-credit units at the two-

year college. Current data on transfer rates were obtained from the Center for the Study of Community Colleges and were linked to school data from NCES files (National Center for Educational Statistics 1991) and to 1990 county characteristics drawn from the population census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). Transfer rate data were available from half the colleges in a large state with a comprehensive community college system that enrolls the vast majority of the students beginning higher education. We use ordinary-least-squares regression. Based on diagnostics of univariate distributions, skewed distributions for size of the student body and the transfer rate warranted logging these variables. Bivariate relations and tolerance values in the regressions indicated no problems of multicollinearity.

Our results may be based on an underestimate of black transfer rates because compared with whites, blacks are less likely to transfer directly from a two-year school (Peng 1977) and more likely to postpone transfer for five or six years (Velez and Javalage 1987). Compared with the state's schools for which transfer rates are unavailable, the sample schools have slightly lower percentages of blacks ($p < .10$), have significantly smaller enrollments ($p < .01$), and are located in communities with relatively smaller percentages of black households ($p < .01$). In other respects they are not significantly different from other schools. It is, however, difficult to estimate how these transfer rates for these schools compare with national rates. The most recent estimate of the national transfer rate, based on data from around one-third of the nation's community colleges, is around 22

percent (Cohen 1993; for earlier estimates, see Cohen and Brawer 1989). For the schools considered here, the rates are 20 percent for whites, and 15 percent for black Americans.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Racial Composition of Schools

In preliminary analyses, using 1991 NCES data on all two-year institutions in the nation, we find that the higher the percent black in a school, the lower are the rates of black degrees of all kinds. There may be many underlying explanations - concentration of minorities in schools with inferior educational opportunities, the location of schools with higher percent black students in black urban neighborhoods with fewer community resources, or the pronounced tendency of black student to be employed. We ask in this study how the racial composition of schools matters for one indicator of minority student outcomes - namely, the transfer rate - while taking other conditions into account.

Other School Factors

School characteristics that are found in studies of individuals which appear to increase the likelihood of transferring include residential facilities, a school's academic orientation, and campus resources (Velez and Javalgi 1987; Lee and Frank 1991). Too few of the two-year institutions in our sample have residences to make a statistical difference, although the tiny number that do have a higher black transfer rate than the others. However, having day-care facilities is far more

common than having dormitories. Given the fact that students of two-year institutions are more likely than those in four-year institutions to be living at home, working, and to be older, we examine the effects of day-care facilities on student outcomes. While one inference that has been drawn from studies of historically black schools is that small schools provide superior educational environments, this may not be the case for black students in predominantly white schools. Moreover, size is a proxy variable for the number and diversity of programs, library size, availability of counseling, and other school resources.

We measure nonacademic orientation by the percent of the students who earn degrees in paraprofessional programs. Such programs do include both associate and certificate degrees, but their emphasis is on vocational training rather than pre-baccalaureate preparation. Our assumption is that the racial composition of such vocationally-oriented programs may be at least as important for black student outcomes as the extent to which the entire student body is enrolled in such programs. As discussed above, these programs are devalued in any school context, and if black students are overrepresented in them, they create an insidious form of tracking. Similarly, we analyze the significance of the overrepresentation of black students in part-time studies.

Community Context

Each institution can be described in terms of its county characteristics, which provide a rough estimate of the community from which a disproportionate number of its students are drawn.

Our preliminary analyses included percent urban, percent female-headed households, average income, percent black, and percent of individuals with no schooling beyond high school. Because virtually all of the schools are located in a highly urbanized county, percent urban accounts for no variation. Percent female-headed households and percent with no college makes no difference for transfer rates. We retain in the analysis two county-level measures - percent black and mean income. Thus, we examine how the racial composition of the community influences black student outcomes independent of the racial composition of the school. And, mean income is a crude control for students' socioeconomic status.

RESULTS

School Effects

(Table 1 about here)

In hierarchical models in Table 1 we present results for the effects of institutional characteristics and community context on black transfer rates. Simple correlations are presented in Column 1. In the first equation (column 2), it is evident that the larger the school, the higher the black transfer rate. Large schools, it should be noted, have very unfavorable faculty-to-student ratios and may be impersonal and "cold." However, they appear to be superior to small schools in promoting high rates of transfer. (Alternatively, they attract students with higher aspirations or higher SES). Percent black has a negative effect on transfer rates of blacks, although it is not highly

significant in this equation. Day-care facilities promote transfer rates, providing evidence of the relatively inexpensive ways that schools can facilitate regular attendance and, thereby, enhance students' ability to complete school and transfer to a four-year program. In contrast with other findings, in these public schools a vocational emphasis has no effect on black transfer rates. Of considerable interest, however, is the result for the composition of students in vocational programs. The higher the ratio of black to white students in such programs, the lower the transfer rate. The results indicate that an emphasis on vocational programs in and of itself does not reduce the black transfer rate, but when disproportionately many blacks are in vocational programs they are less likely to attend four-year colleges.

Community Effects

In column 3, results are presented that include community characteristics - percent black and mean income of the county's population. Income is, as expected, positively related to transfer rates, as it an excellent proxy for community resources and the economic well-being of residents. The racial composition of the community is itself not a predictor of black transfer rates ($r = -.00$) and the reason it is significant in the equation in column 3 is that its effects are transmitted via school characteristics. Counties that have a disproportionate number of blacks also have schools with a disproportionate number of blacks and a higher ratio of blacks to whites in vocational programs. Net of these effects on factors that decrease the black transfer

rate, percent black in the community has a significant positive effect on black transfers. While this conclusion is based on a small number of cases, and we cannot account for the underlying reasons, the results are interesting. Predominantly black communities may foster academic aspirations, but black communities also have schools that are disproportionately black and also schools in which blacks are concentrated in vocational programs. These are factors that impair black transfer rates. On the other hand, schools in black communities are more likely to have day-care centers, which is why the beta for day care is higher in the equation in column 3 than in the one in column 2.

Another indicator of disparities between black and white students is the extent to which black students are more likely than whites to be enrolled part-time. The final equation in Table 1 includes the ratio of black to white part-time students. It has no effect on transfer rates and does not alter the other results.

COMPARISONS

Our ongoing research examines degree outcomes for the nation and will yield more robust estimates of school and community influences on these outcomes. However, it is useful to compare these results on transfer rates with results on rates of obtaining degrees for the identical schools. Particular focus is on the racial composition of schools, and the racial composition of the paraprofessional programs. In replications of the equation in column 3, whites are much less likely to transfer in schools with high proportions of minority students (beta = -.63), and are

more likely to complete a certificate program (beta = .47) rather than an associate degree.

In contrast, the black rate of obtaining certificates and associate degrees is unrelated to the racial composition of the school (the beta's are, respectively, .08 and .00). The results for the effects of the racial composition of paraprofessional programs indicate that the higher the percent blacks in them, the lower the rate of black certificate completion (beta = -.23). There are two conclusions to draw from these results. The strongest one is that the transfer rate of both white and black students is lower in schools with higher percentages of black students independent of other school and community characteristics.

The second conclusion is that when school programs are racially imbalanced, black students have unfavorable outcomes. Not only does a higher proportion of black-Americans in paraprofessional programs impair their likelihood of transfer but it also impairs their likelihood of completing a certificate program. It is useful to consider these results in terms of actual distributions of the school characteristics under consideration. The range of schools in our sample with respect to percent students in paraprofessional degrees is 0% to 63% and the range of black representation in paraprofessional programs is 0% to 100%. Although the correlation between percent black and percent paraprofessional in the school is modest (r = .12), we have seen that when black students are concentrated in

paraprofessional programs, it reduces their rates both of transfer and of obtaining certificates.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this limited study we have tried to identify what improves black student transfers from two-year to four-year schools. The tentative conclusion is that large schools and a relatively affluent community context are advantages. Transfer rates are also higher for black students who attend schools in communities with high percentages of black residents. However, this community-composition effect is detected only after school characteristics are controlled. What is apparent is that schools in black communities have higher percentages of black students in two-year schools and also higher percentages of black students in vocational programs. Both of these latter factors depress the transfer rate, offsetting the net effects of the communities' racial composition.

That is, the racial composition of the community has opposite effects from the racial composition of the school. The higher the percent of black-American students, the lower the transfer rate. And, while schools that emphasize vocational training do not impair these students' likelihood of transferring, when vocational programs are predominantly black, there is a significantly lower transfer rate (as well as a reduced rate of certificates). If we are correct that vocational programs are generally devalued in the two-year college setting, schools should be aware of the implications of the racial

compositions of these programs. A final conclusion is that day-care facilities matter. While previous research identified dormitories as being conducive to successful outcomes, public institutions are hard-pressed for funds, and, to a great extent, students of two-year institutions often have jobs and families, and these preclude residency options. Day-care programs are relatively easy to implement and appear to enhance students' educational outcomes.

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Table 1. Transfer Rates (logged) of Black-American Students Predicted by School-Level and Community-Level Factors. Correlations and Standardized Coefficients

	(1) r	(2) beta	(3) beta	(4) beta
School Factors				
% Black	-.17	-.22*	-.30**	-.30**
Day Care	.20	.21*	.24**	.24*
Log Enrollment	.51***	.37***	.31***	.32**
% Vocational Enrollment	.10	.01	.03	.03
Black/White Vocational Enrollment	-.31**	-.29**	-.36***	-.36***
Percent Black Part-Time Enrollment	.02			-.02
Community Factors				
% Black	-.00		.20*	.21*
Mean Income	.36**		.35***	35***
Adj R		.31	.43	.42
N		53	51	50

* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01